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SUBJECT: ISLAMISTS OFFER CRITIQUE OF U.S. POLICY, ADVICE ON PROMOTING MODERATION

Ref: State 121757

1. SUMMARY AND COMMENT: On July 26, CDA hosted a gathering of Kuwaiti Islamists from the media, academic, religious and political fields for the purpose of engaging Kuwait's religious leaders and opinion makers in a formal dialogue about U.S. policy and world events. The guests, some of whom expressed their surprise at being invited to such an event and praise for the quality of the invitees, politely but firmly offered critiques of U.S. policies and approaches in the region, particularly regarding Iraq and Guantanamo Bay. They also took advantage of the informal meeting to share ideas about how best to reclaim Islam from extremists. While the discussion largely highlighted differences, participants agreed on the value of continuing to engage in dialogue between U.S. officials and Islamists. The Kuwaiti participants appeared genuine in their desire to continue contacts. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

"This is Humiliating and Only Creates Enemies"

2. Many of the attendees, while polite, expressed highly unfavorable opinions of the United States and U.S. policies. Bassam Al-Shatti, a professor at Kuwait University's College of Sharia (Islamic Law) and the editor-in-chief of Al-Furqan, a Salafi weekly magazine, described American society as "racist" and engaged CDA in a lengthy critique of U.S. policy. He found particular fault with U.S. treatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay and the U.S.'s policies towards Israel. Al-Shatti cited U.S. visa policies as evidence of bias against Muslims and argued that humiliating procedures were leading many Muslims to conclude that the U.S. did not want to engage Muslims.

3. Salem Al-Nashi, the spokesman for the Traditional Salafi religious current, admonished Emboffs about the Department of State Human Rights Report. He complained that the report criticizes Kuwait for policies such as inheritance law, which the Department finds discriminatory but which, according to him, are determined by Islamic law and therefore not negotiable. He also questioned the report's focus on violence against women. While he conceded that domestic violence was an isolated problem in Kuwait, and everywhere, he argued that the U.S. would be better served focusing on more pressing international problems.

4. In contrast to Al-Nashi, Dr. Abdullah Al-Ghanem, a Salafi professor of international relations at Kuwait University, said that the U.S. should expand its focus on human rights, but that it must tread carefully in its promotion of democracy. Al-Ghanem agreed with the premise that as political opportunity increased, the lure of extremism was likely to decrease, but cautioned, "Don't push democracy too quickly."

5. U.S. conduct in Iraq was a particular sore point for Dr. Ibrahim Al-Hadban, a moderate Islamist professor of political science at Kuwait University. Al-Hadban said that raids and arrests across Iraq by U.S. troops served only to alienate and anger the Iraqis, especially when innocent people are the victims of such treatment. "This is humiliating and only creates enemies," Al-Hadban said.

The Challenges of Promoting Moderation

6. On the issue of encouraging moderate Muslims to combat extremism, no consensus emerged on how best to do this, and this, in conjunction with the widely divergent definitions among the attendees of "moderation," highlights the difficulties of such a proposition. Al-Hadban, who agreed that moderate Islamists must speak out, offered the example of well-known Kuwaiti moderate Islamist Dr. Tarek Al-Suwaidan. Al-Suwaidan, who recently sat on a panel of Arab commentators speaking on the issue of women's rights and Islam broadcast on the BBC, is named as a co-conspirator in a 9-11 lawsuit. Al-Hadban argued that the average citizen views moderate positions and policies as ineffective when their supporters, like Al-Suwaidan, are accused of backing extremist views. He urged that the U.S. and other Western countries not condemn as terrorists those viewed as voices

of reason among Arabs.

17. That suggestion then requires the definition of "moderate" and "extreme" - a difficulty inadvertently highlighted by Shi'a scholar Abdul Hussain Al-Sultan. Al-Sultan agreed that Kuwaiti moderates must speak loudly in condemning violence and encouraging moderation. But asked by IO to identify such moderates, he offered Dr. Mohammed Al-Tabtabaei and Dr. Mohammed Al-Awadhi. Al-Tabtabaei, the dean of the College of Sharia, has written newspaper columns outlining when and how it is appropriate to beat one's wife, and Al-Awadhi was involved in 2004 in the creation of a political group, Hizb Al-Tahreer (Liberation Party), whose stated goal was the creation of a universal Islamic caliphate.

18. Even if moderate voices can be found, Dr. Humoud Al-Hattab said that such intervention is too late. A former Muslim Brotherhood member and 24-year employee of the Ministry of Education, during which he held the post of general supervisor for Islamic Education, Al-Hattab said that a revamped curriculum, which taught young people moderation and tolerance, combined with active parents promoting the same message, could prevent extremism.

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